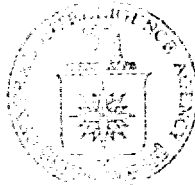


CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Memorandum



THE SITUATION IN
SOUTH VIETNAM

(Information as of 1200 EST)

DOS, JCS, ARMY review(s) completed.

12 Sept 1963

PREPARED FOR THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
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12 September 1963

THE SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

(Information as of 1200 EDT)

SUMMARY

Our embassy in Saigon, reporting on a quick opinion sampling of Vietnamese willing to talk to Americans, finds that since 21 August there has been an increase in disaffection and discontent among practically all leading elements of the population.

Except among students, however, this disaffection has not been translated into antiregime action, and the embassy believes it is likely to remain passive as long as no dynamic leaders emerge to energize the opposition.

The US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, assessing military attitudes, finds the top commanders committed to the regime in spite of disgruntlement, with some feeling that if anything is to be done it will have to be undertaken by the US. The war effort has not been appreciably affected.

Both assessments find discontent centered more sharply on the Nhus than on Diem, but there is wide disagreement as to whether they can be considered separate entities, and whether Diem can in fact be separated from Nhu.

General Dinh, military governor of Saigon and commander of the adjacent Third Corps Area, reportedly has been jockeyed out of both commands by disparate military and civilian elements who consider him ambitious and unstable. His slated replacement as Saigon military governor is considered strongly anti-American.

Student unrest continues but disorders are being held in check. There are reports that suspected student leaders are being rounded up at night.

The Viet Cong may be attempting to launch concerted attacks in their stronger areas to cash in on any vulnerabilities engendered by the political situation, but government counteraction has been much more effective than press reports indicate.

I. ASSESSMENTS

1. The US Embassy in Saigon reports that discontent and disaffection have increased since 21 August among top civilian echelons, urban professionals and students, and to a noticeable extent in lower levels of the police and security services. Except among students, this attitude has not crystallized into antiregime action and is unlikely to do so unless strong leadership should emerge from some quarter.

(The embassy notes that this survey of current attitudes is based on a quick sampling of those persons willing to talk to Americans under present circumstances.)

a) Among top government echelons, confidence in Diem and Nhu has been impaired, but Diem is less a target than Nhu. There is an increasing tendency to regard them as inseparable. Nhu is respected but hated and Mme. Nhu is even less popular. Most GVN leaders feel powerless about the situation, but many would probably jump on the bandwagon of a successful coup. Vice President Tho is regarded as well-meaning but not forceful. Foreign Minister Mau has gained stature by his resignation.

b) Among the civilian bureaucracy in Saigon, resentment is less sharp than among intellectuals and students, but morale seems low. These groups feel committed to GVN policies and fear reprisals if they talk freely.

c) Among province and district bureaucrats there has been an increase in frustration and some lowering of morale. Province chiefs, however, are an exception since they are hand-picked. They feel the move against the Buddhists was necessary. Information on district chiefs is scanty, but they are less politically involved with the regime. Most bureaucrats feel Nhu holds the real power in the GVN. Attitudes seem to vary with location, martial law having left many smaller communities unaffected.

d) Among police and security officials some top-level security officials including Military Security Chief Do Mau are reportedly

dissatisfied, and Police Commissioner Y more so than ever before. Special Forces Commander Tung is loyal and will go along with the regime. Almost all levels of the police had become increasingly antagonistic toward Buddhist demonstrations before the crackdown, and many upper levels endorse the actions taken. Medium level officials, however, have expressed the feeling that the actions were too severe and many feel Diem and Nhu have lost face. Some demoralization is reported in Hue. There is no indication, however, that the police at all levels will not continue to work with the Diem-Nhu regime.

e) Urban professionals, intellectuals and students: This group has been in large part disaffected for years, although many have respected Diem and focused their criticism on the Nhush. They tend to believe the US is in large part responsible for the regime. Their reaction to the crackdown on Buddhists has been emotional. Their confidence in Diem's ability to rule even without Nhu is greatly impaired, although some still would accept him in such circumstances. They tend to believe the war cannot now be won with Diem, but talk of turning to the VC seems largely visceral, and they are not generally impressed by a neutralist solution.

f) Labor: The only important group, Tran Quoc Buu's CVTC, appears shocked by the action against the Buddhists and blames Nhu. While more disaffected than previously, the CVTC and Buu are likely to follow a policy of caution. Buu believes that if the Ngo family survives, the Nhush will get worse, but seems to see no clear alternative to Diem.

g) Buddhists: Buddhist leadership now seems temporarily fragmented and the new GVN-sponsored Buddhist hierarchy is probably unacceptable to most of the Buddhist following. The Buddhist campaign has promoted greater cohesiveness among Buddhists in general. Militant leaders such as Tri Quang have lost all confidence in Diem but have not proposed any alternative.

h) Catholics: The majority of Catholics have sought to dissociate themselves from GVN actions against the Buddhists. Many fear that they may eventually suffer from heightened religious

tensions. However, there has been some tendency among Catholics, particularly in Hué, to close ranks behind the government as the situation has deteriorated.

2. The following are the main points of MACV's survey of military attitudes:

- a) The military remains loyal to the regime, although confidence in the regime is not as solid as it was.
- b) The military regards Diem as the proper and legal head of state, although perhaps poorly advised.
- c) The military blames the Nhus rather than Diem for the regime's troubles.
- d) Ranking officers consider Diem and Nhu inseparable for all practical purposes. Junior officers, however, tend to regard them as separate entities.
- e) The military looks to the US to eliminate or reduce the influence of the Nhus. If this is not done, the military will accept the status quo.
- f) The war effort has not been affected very much, and military discipline remains good.
- g) The military remains essentially pro-US. The crisis has not caused any discernible shift in sentiment toward the Viet Cong.

3. British Ambassador Etherington Smith in Saigon feels that the Diem regime has overcome the Buddhist problem and is strongly in the saddle. He feels that even though hatred of the government is very great in the middle and upper classes and is bound to affect the war effort, attempts to get another government will probably fail, and should not be tried even if inaction also spells failure.

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IV. MILITARY SITUATION

The scope of Viet Cong activity on 9 and 10 September suggests a possible attempt to exploit the political situation in South Vietnam, but--contrary to the impression being given in some press reports--government forces responded effectively and inflicted heavy casualties on the Viet Cong.

The Viet Cong launched a total of two attacks in battalion strength and three of company size in the Fourth Corps area south of Saigon. The three smaller attacks on 9 September, on widely separated outposts, were simultaneous, suggesting a concerted operation.

Late on 10 September the Viet Cong fired 20 to 30 rounds of mortar at an important American helicopter base in the delta without hitting their target.

V. OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

1. Italian Ambassador D'Orlandi in Saigon sizes up French policy in Vietnam as one of wishful thinking by De Gaulle and French Ambassador Lalouette that negotiations between the North and South will lead to suspension of guerrilla warfare and a restoration of French economic interests and political influence. Ambassador Lodge agrees with D'Orlandi. Lalouette leaves for France today for consultations.

2. Prince Sihanouk sees neutralization of South Vietnam as the last hope for that country, and advises the West to take this "last chance" if the Communist camp offers it. In an editorial in his weekly newspaper, The Nationalist, dated 10 September, Sihanouk dismissed as unrealistic any notion that all or both halves of Vietnam can be neutralized. Sihanouk expressed the belief that a Communist takeover in South Vietnam is inevitable. He fears Cambodia's fate will also be sealed soon afterward.

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